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978-1-107-08584-8 - Nature, Culture, and Society: Anthropological Perspectives on Life

Gisli Pálsson

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Nature, Culture, and Society

Life is currently one of the most active zones of politics and economic production, as biological material is increasingly the subject of engineering, banking, reproduction, and exchange. These developments represent some of the most challenging issues facing humanity in the twenty-first century and call for new forms of engagement – and new anthropologies of life.

Reflecting upon the changing human condition, Pálsson addresses various conflated zones of life at particular times and scales, from the genome to the human body and the global environment. Using a “biosocial” perspective, he argues, will help us to capture the hybrid nature of life, enhancing our sensitivity to differences and similarities in hierarchies, the reproduction of bio-objects and the exchanges between humans, other species, and the environment.

Engaging with topical issues on the public agenda, from personal genomics to human–animal relations to the global environment, the book sets out a compelling case for meaningful change.

GISLI PÁLSSON is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Iceland and Visiting Professor at King’s College, London.

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Preface

This book brings together a collection of essays that I have written for different books and journals over the past two decades or so. They have been selected for the sake of theoretical and empirical coherence; all of them address some aspects of what I call “anthropologies of life,” focusing on genomics, bodies, the environment, and their relations. Some of them are new (Chapters 6 and 12), others have been written at different moments for different agendas. Written in 1994, the oldest essay (“Enskilment at Sea”; Chapter 9) may seem an oddity. It did, however, represent a significant and somewhat surprising shift in my writing and perspective and, moreover, it resonates with much of what I wrote later, providing a link between bodies and environments, practices and politics. I have arranged the essays in three sections to provide a general flow from the molecular basis of life to the body and the global scene. The Introduction and Afterword highlight the context and the main issues covered, situating them in anthropological discussions and in the current “biosocial turn.” Assembling the essays, I have edited each of them, sometimes heavily, to connect, update, and avoid repetition. Those who are interested in details that I have omitted should consult “Sources and Acknowledgments” at the end of the book where the relevant original publications are listed.

My work on both the book and the series of projects on which it is based would not have been possible without the friendship and the support I have enjoyed over the years, financial and intellectual. This work has been generously funded by the Icelandic Centre for Research, the University of Iceland, the Nordic Environmental Research Programme, and the Nordic Committee for Social Science Research (NOS-S). Also, invitations to a number of universities and research institutes have been highly useful, alerting me to new avenues and developments. Furthermore, participation in several workshops and collaborative research projects has been personally rewarding and intellectually invigorating.

I thank publishers and editors who have granted permissions to reproduce material earlier published. Also, I am grateful to numerous colleagues,

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students, friends, journal editors, workshop discussants, assistants, administrators, and informants (if such a term is still permitted) – all of whom have kindly shared with me their thoughts on important issues or taken time to read my drafts at one stage or another, offering comments, correcting my course, and generating further work: David Akin, Emily Angulalik, Debbora Battaglia, Aletta Biersack, Carole H. Browner, James Carrier, Kim Crockatt, E. Paul Durrenberger, Sigríður Sunna Ebenersersdóttir, Yulia Egorova, César Enrique Giraldo Herrera, Herbert Gottweis, James Greenberg, Steven Gudeman, Sigurður Örn Guðbjörnsson, Akhil Gupta, Kristín Erla Harðardóttir, Anna Harris, Kirsten Hastrup, Agnar Helgason, Tim Ingold, Mark Jackson, Susan Kelly, Marianne Lien, Susan Lindee, Margaret Lock, Jonathan Marks, Emily Martin, Mette Nordal Svendsen, Benjamin Orlove, Thomas Osborne, Barbara Prainsack, Tanya Richardson, Laura Rival, Silke Schicktanz, Ingrid Schneider, Henning Sloth Pedersen, Marianne Sommer, Sverker Sörlin, Halldór Stefánsson, Bronislaw Szersynski, Mary Ellen Thomas, Martina Tyrrell, Ricardo Ventura Santos, Matthew Welpton, Gabriele Werner-Felmayer, Gisa Weszkalnys, Sally Wyatt, Þórólfur Þórlindsson, and Höskuldur Þráinsson. No doubt I am missing some of the names in this long-term project. Some have to be omitted; a number of anonymous reviewers have provided extensive help.

Cambridge University Press staff and their reviewers embraced the book concept from the start. I thank all of them, in particular Executive Publisher Andrew Winnard who took the initiative and helped to structure the product and followed it through. The projects on which the essays are based would not have been possible without the support and patience of my family – especially my wife, Guðný. During the final construction of the book, I have to add, our grandchildren – Gísli Þór, Jón Bjarni, and Saga Rós – have been a continuous source of delight, contributing, in their own fashion, new perspectives and insights on anthropologies of life.

GISLI PALSSON, REYKJAVIK